Errors and Corrective Feedback: Updated Theory and Classroom Practice

By William Ancker

In his book *Mistakes and Correction*, Julian Edge (1989:20) says that when we teachers decide to correct our students, "we have to be sure that we are using correction positively to support learning." Probably all foreign language teachers would agree with Edge's comment, but they would not necessarily agree on how we should correct errors our students make.[1]

We can see a gradual shift in classroom practice, from the immediate correction of every error in older methods based on behavioral theories of learning (e.g. audio-lingualism) to a more tolerant modern approach. Yet error correction remains one of the most contentious and misunderstood issues in the second and foreign language teaching profession.

Updated Theory on Errors and Correction

Recent theory on language acquisition and teaching methodology supports the position that not all errors should be corrected, and those that are corrected should usually not be "treated" immediately (Krashen 1987:74–76, 116–119; Doff 1988:186–192; Lewis 1993:164–179; Nunan and Lamb 1996: 68–80; Ur 1996:246–249). This position is based on the fact that errors are normal and unavoidable during the learning process. Also, current theories of how we learn languages recognize that habit formation is only one part of the process.

Errors occur for many reasons. One obvious cause is interference from the native language. A learner may make errors because she assumes that the target language and her native language are similar, when in fact they are different. This kind of overgeneralization is also the cause of many mistaken guesses. Another obvious cause is simply an incomplete knowledge of the target language. A third common cause of errors is the complexity of the target language. Certain aspects of English (e.g., the s in the third person singular present tense) are difficult for all students, no matter what their native languages. Spelling is also problematic for nonnative speakers of English (and many native speakers, too!). Finally, fossilization occurs when an individual reaches a satisfactory level of competence in the L2 and does not worry about persistent mistakes she may make, which may not inhibit communication. (See Brown 1994:203–225, and Ellis 1994:47–71, for a thorough discussion of causes of errors.)

What is an Error?

At this point, some definitions are in order. H. D. Brown (1994:205) offers the following distinctions. A *mistake*, he says, is "a performance error that is either a random guess or a 'slip,' in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly." According to this definition, a native speaker could make a mistake in her native language. Errors, on the other hand, are problems that a native speaker would not have. Brown defines an *error* as "noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner."

The key term in this definition is "interlanguage." As someone learns a foreign language, the errors she makes indicate her level of proficiency. Clearly, the errors of a beginner are different from the errors of an advanced student, and what were once errors can become mere mistakes.

Edge (1989:9–11) offers simpler definitions which are especially important for classroom teachers to keep in mind. He says a *slip* is what a learner can self-correct, and an *error* is what a learner can't self-correct. An *attempt* is a guess or when neither the intended meaning nor the structure is clear to the teacher.

This distinction between error and mistake, or between error and slip, is reason enough for teachers to abandon the practice of immediately correcting students. Often, a brief pause or a nonverbal cue is sufficient for students to recognize and then correct mistakes they make while speaking. The teacher simply has to allow that pause to occur. Errors and attempts are different, of course, because students can't correct themselves, but that doesn't mean the teacher must.

An Action Research Survey

Most English language teachers I have worked with in Latin America, Africa, Central Asia, and the Caucasus are modifying their classroom practice to accommodate a more tolerant approach to errors and mistakes. They no longer automatically correct their students. Instead, they encourage self-correction and peer correction. They are less concerned with preventing errors and more focused on developing learners' communicative skills. Ironically, many students still expect, even request, the teacher to correct all their errors.

To find out if teachers' expectations toward error correction differ from students' expectations, I have been conducting some action research in my work as a teacher trainer. Over the past four years, in 15 countries, I have been asking teachers, teacher trainees, and students: "Should teachers correct every error students make when using English?" We don't first discuss the meanings of error and mistake (or error, slip, and attempt), and I ask participants to answer "yes" or "no" only and to briefly explain why or why not. Percentages of yes and no answers are calculated, and the most frequent reasons are tallied.

It is a flawed survey, I admit. The best answer, which is "it depends," is not an option. Also, the question is very general. I ask respondents to consider spoken English only, but I don't specify the age or proficiency level of students or the type of lesson. By asking them if they should correct *every* error, I signal to the respondents that I consider "no" the best answer.

Should teachers correct every error students make when using English?			
	Teachers n=802	Teacher trainees n=126	Students n=143
% yes answers	25	36	76
% no answers	75	64	24

Survey Results

The most interesting pattern in the results is that ever since the number of respondents reached several hundred, the response percentages have remained fairly consistent. The percentage of teachers who answer "no" has been almost the same as the percentage of students who answer "yes." The answers of the teacher trainees resemble the answers of the teachers more than those of the students.

The reasons given for why teachers should correct every error and why teachers shouldn't are also similar. The most frequent reason given for not wanting correction was the negative impact of correction on students' confidence and motivation (affective filter). The most frequent reason given for wanting correction was the importance of learning to speak English correctly. [2]

Frequent reasons why teachers should not correct every error

Affective Concerns

1. Correction may develop something like a barrier, and students will be afraid of making mistakes and will not speak or study English with pleasure (Kyrgyz teacher).

2. If teachers correct every error students make, pupils begin hating them (Uzbek student).

3. If the teacher corrects all the errors students make, then the students will think that they are dumb and not good enough to speak English (Azeri student).

Classroom Management Concerns

4. Correcting every mistake would take too much time (Guatemalan teacher trainee).

5. It is tiring for the teacher, not to mention the student (Venezuelan teacher).

6. I think it's impossible to correct every error (Moroccan teacher).

Teaching Concerns

7. The student can't even process all of those corrections (Panamanian teacher).

8. Students will forget the corrections (Kazakhstani teacher).

9. The correction of each mistake will confuse a student (Kyrgyz teacher).

Frequently cited reasons why teachers should correct every error

Learning Concerns

1. The teacher should correct the errors in order to let the students know what's wrong and what's right (Georgian teacher).

2. I think that the students must speak without being afraid that they will speak with errors (Armenian student).

3. If nobody corrects our errors, we will never learn good English (Ecuadorian student).

4. If you don't correct them, the students could get confused later on (Honduran teacher).

Fossilization Concerns

5. Every mistake should be taken care of at the moment it is made, otherwise students will keep on making the same mistake over and over again (Colombian teacher).

Professional Concerns

6. If a teacher doesn't correct errors, he is not a real teacher (Uzbek teacher).

7. Teachers should be the main way to develop students' skills (Costa Rican teacher trainee).

Implications for Our Classroom Practice

The most important implication of this survey is that something should be done to rectify the opposing expectations of teachers and students about how errors (also mistakes and attempts) should be handled. Teachers may think they are doing the right thing by not correcting immediately and frequently, but students (and other teachers) may assume their teachers don't know English well enough to give appropriate feedback and, even worse, that their teachers are unprofessional and don't care how well they learn English.

There are several steps we can take to correct this situation of differing expectations. First, we must establish clear objectives in our lesson plans. Next, we can discuss the learning process with our students. Finally, we should employ alternative activities that demonstrate other ways of giving feedback besides immediate correction by the teacher.

Establishing Lesson Objectives

The first and most important step a teacher must take is to determine the objective of an activity. If the objective is to develop accuracy, then of course correction is necessary. In this case, the best approach is to allow the student to self-correct first. If that doesn't work, allow for peer correction. If no one seems to know, then the teacher can give the correction/ answer. Although this can seem time consuming, it helps to focus students' attention and to reduce reliance on the teacher, thereby encouraging student autonomy.

If the objective of the activity is to develop fluency, then correction may not be necessary or desirable. Constantly interrupting students to correct them can be irritating and disruptive, especially when lack of accuracy does not hinder communication. If there are frequent errors or mistakes, the teacher can make a mental note to provide feedback after the activity.

Discussion of the Learning Process

Not correcting errors sounds scandalous even irresponsible to some language educators and many students. However, not correcting an error is not the same as teaching incorrect forms. We should explain our rationale for not correcting, even if it means using the native language, so that our students have a better understanding of what we do and why we do it, or in the case of correction, why we don't always do it.

I like to use an analogy when discussing errors with students who expect and request immediate and frequent correction by the teacher. Learning to speak another language is similar to learning to play a musical instrument. Both are processes that require intellectual effort (e.g., studying new symbols, memorizing), new physical skills (e.g., manual dexterity to play an instrument, pronunciation of new sounds in the target language), and a tremendous amount of practice. No one in her right mind would expect to learn to play music without making many mistakes in the process; why should anyone expect to learn a language without ever uttering a mistake?

Another way to demonstrate to wary students that errors and mistakes/slips are a normal and unavoidable part of the learning process is to use humor. Every second/foreign learner has made mistakes that are unintentionally funny. We could give a few examples from our own experience. Young children make errors, and we think it is cute. Why should teenage and adult students feel so self-conscious? Obviously, our own reactions during class influence our students' level of comfort. If we want them to be more tolerant, then we must do so ourselves by resisting the urge to automatically and immediately correct.

A brief explanation of interlanguage can be helpful, too. We expect beginning students to make certain kinds of errors and more advanced students to make other kinds of errors. For this reason, some authors maintain that correction is ineffective, even a waste of time (e.g., Krashen 1987 and Lewis 1993). Although not all teachers take this extreme view, experience often shows that correcting what is beyond learners' current level of understanding can interrupt a lesson and result in more confusion than clarification (Allwright and Bailey 1991:92, 100–104).

Finally, we need to shift our students' focus, and our own, to the positive aspects of errors. An error, or self-correction of a mistake, indicates what the learner can do in the target language. It is intellectually dishonest and counterproductive to ignore our students' success and exaggerate the seriousness of errors and mistakes.

Alternative Activities

Of course, no one sets out to learn a foreign language incorrectly, so it is understandable that our students look to us to provide lots of feedback. However, as all experienced teachers know, correction doesn't always work. Students may repeat the same error or mistake only moments after being corrected. The frustration and futility can be demonstrated by tactfully pointing it out when it occurs and reiterating that when we focus on meaning we naturally tend to overlook minor problems with accuracy.

Although attempts can be wrong, it is a good idea to encourage students to make logical guesses about new words and structures in the target language. For example, we could prepare an activity

based on cognates and borrowed words to give them some practice (and success) to encourage this type of compensation strategy rather than avoidance strategies.

We can help our students develop their intuition about English by doing some contrastive analysis of L1 and L2 (especially phonology and syntax) if all students share a common language. If there is no common language, then we can highlight a few of the most difficult aspects of English grammar, pronunciation, or spelling, to reassure students that problems in these areas are to be expected.

Experienced teachers know that students will often correct each other without prompting. We can foster this type of cooperation by discussing and listing polite ways to offer feedback. At the same time, we can clarify what is considered impolite. By addressing the issue of appropriate responses, we help students develop their sociolinguistic competence in English.

Conclusion

It is an oversimplification to say that there is any consensus in the TEFL/TESL field about error correction. Many teachers and their students still prefer immediate correction by the teacher, in the audio-lingual style, despite its lack of efficacy and its punitive nature. And some authors disregard the distinction between error, mistake and slip presented here (Bartram and Walton 1991:20–21).

Given these differences of opinion and practice among educators, not to mention the myriad variables regarding students (e.g., age, learning styles, goals, motivation), it is hard to generalize about error correction, unless it is a comment like Edge's, which begins this article. No matter who or where we teach, however, we can begin to address the problem of differing expectations by talking to our students on the metacognitive level about errors, mistakes, and correction. What are their expectations? Do theirs differ from ours, as these survey results suggest? Such a discussion can give them a clearer understanding of our teaching, as well as a better understanding of the language learning process.

References

Allwright, D., and K. M. Bailey. 1991. *Focus on the language classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bartram, M., and R. Walton. 1991. *Correction: A positive approach to language mistakes.* Hove: Language Teaching Publications.

Brown, H. D. 1994. *Principles of language learning and teaching*, 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

Doff, A. 1988. *Teach English: A training course for teachers.* Trainer's handbook. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Edge, J. 1989. *Mistakes and correction.* London: Longman.

Ellis, R. 1994. *The study of second language acquisition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Krashen, S. 1987. *Principles and practice in second language acquisition.* Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International.

Lewis, M. 1993. *The lexical approach: The state of ELT and a way forward.* Hove: Language Teaching Publications.

Nunan, D., and C. Lamb. 1996. *The self-directed teacher: Managing the learning process.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ur, P. 1996. *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

William Ancker is an English Language Officer with the U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC.

[1] This article focuses on errors and correction in spoken, not written, language.

[2] In the reasons given, most respondents made no distinction between error and mistake/slip.